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Birthday bash for Pope's brother sparks funding row

BERLIN (Reuters) - Religious groups in Germany have attacked the diocese of the Pope's hometown for planning to use taxpayer's money to fund a birthday party for his brother.

To celebrate Georg Ratzinger's 85th birthday, a party, which German media say will cost around 100,000 euros ($124,400), will be held at the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican City -- the official residence of his younger brother, Pope Benedict XVI.

A spokesman for the diocese of Regensburg in Bavaria confirmed the money would cover the cost of flying 90 vocalists from the city's liturgical choir, and 37 baroque musicians to Rome to perform Mozart's Mass in C-Major.

"Although we're giving the money, we see it more as a loan," diocese spokesman Jakob Schoetz said Monday.

In Germany, Protestant and Roman Catholic citizens pay some 9 percent of their income tax to the church or local parish. Around 70 percent of church revenues come from taxes, which the diocese is free to spend on anything church-related.

Schoetz said CDs and DVDs of the concert would be sold to raise money, and that individuals and groups also would donate, thereby helping to reimburse the diocese.

Detractors of the plan said the party was unnecessary and would hit the Church's reputation at a time when the world is bracing for economic hard times.

"This is a perfect example of how money from the church tax is abused," said Sigrid Grabmeier, spokeswoman the German branch of 'We are Church', a Roman Catholic umbrella group with over 1 million members across 20 countries.

"We can compare it to the financial crisis," she added. "In both cases there's a lack of transparency when it comes to authorities spending taxpayer's money."

(Reporting by Josie Cox; editing by Michael Roddy)
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